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ABSTRACT

A remediation approach developed by the Vilonia public schools (Arkansas) to remediate content/skill deficiencies in middle level students resulted from three conditions: state laws and regulations regarding minimum competency testing; more awareness of problems with at-risk students; and recognition of the need to reach students academically during middle school. Students in Vilonia's middle level remediation program are at-risk due to such factors as low basic skills, inclusion in low track classes, lack of parental involvement in schooling, low academic expectations of parents, teachers, and students themselves, and lack of leisure reading. They are not likely to make an adequate transition to desired types of adult lives. Under the program, these students are assigned to a regular classroom teacher experienced in reading and remediation efforts. Goals for them are: to receive an enriched curriculum with remediation and regular content; to maintain an academic (rather than behavioral) focus in the classroom; to enhance self-concept and increase self-expectations; to attain the appropriate stage of discipline; and to pass the state Minimum Performance Test, moving on to high school without tracking. (SM)

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REMEDIATION OF CONTENT/SKILL DEFICIENCIES IN MIDDLE LEVEL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

"AT-RISK MIDDLE LEVEL STUDENTS: A SCHOOL'S RESPONSE TO CONTENT/SKILL DEFICIENCIES"

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At-risk students are one of the elements of reality in almost every school district, and how a district responds to the needs of these pupils tells a great deal about that district. This is how one rural school district responded to the content/skill deficiencies of at-risk middle level students in grades seven and eight. The response was influenced by the research on effective schools and best practices.

The identification of these students occurred in two major ways. They were recognized by their scores on the state's minimum performance test and the state-adopted standardized test and by the observation, assessment, and/or judgment of teachers, counselors and administrators.

The school developed a program with five goals: 1) To provide students with an enriched curriculum which includes both remediation and regular course content, 2) To maintain an academic focus in the classroom rather than a remedial or training one, 3) To enhance students' self-concept and increase students' expectations of themselves, 4) To help students attain the appropriate stage of discipline, and 5) To enable students to pass the state minimum performance test and to continue their education in high school without tracking per se'. Two years of effort indicate success.

Vilonia Public Schools developed a program to remediate content/skill deficiencies in middle level students as a result of three things: state laws and regulations which led to minimum competency testing in grades three, six, and eight, an increasing awareness of the problem of at-risk students, and recognition of the importance of the critical middle school years in reaching students academically. This paper focuses on the efforts of the school district to deal with these considerations. There is a brief background about developments within the state, a concise acknowledgement of the problem and description of at risk students, an account of the school district's approach, and finally the results and conclusions. The school district has approximately 1500 students and is located about twenty miles north of the Little Rock - North Little Rock urban area.

In 1979 the Arkansas Legislature in Act 666 required the State Board of Education to review and revise the Minimum Performance Goals adopted in 1977 in accordance with Act 484 and to set minimum performance goals for students in the eighth grade. (2:i) In 1980 the Arkansas Department of Education published a 60-page booklet of basic educational skills for K-8 students. Because of the certainty of future

performance testing, these skills were stated so that they could be readily measured. The publication contained a sequential development of skills, and those that were considered to be minimums at a particular grade level were indicated with an asterisk. These identified minimum skills were not meant to be the total program but were to be emphasized and mastered by the students. Readiness skills for each of these designated minimum ones were placed at the preceding grade level. (2:i-iii)

Test items were written for each of these minimum skills and subjected to analysis and evaluation. Several forms of the test were developed for the targeted third, sixth, and eighth grades. The students in grade three are now tested in mathematics and reading. Students in grades six and eight are tested in mathematics, reading, science, language arts, and social studies. The eighth grade students must have a composite score of 75% or better on the Minimum Performance Test (MPT) or they are automatically retained. However, those who fail the test, which is usually given in March, may retake those sections of the test which they failed as many as two times in the summer. If the students do not reach the 75% level after all this, they are retained and a special plan, somewhat similar to an IEP, is developed for each of them for their work

in their second year in grade eight.

Each class and each subject area in the school must average 85% or better on the test or the school must develop a plan or program to remedy the situation. Continued below par performance results in a citation for the school from the Arkansas Department of Education and close scrutiny from this agency.

The students who have problems passing the Minimum Performance Test are generally within that student population which experiences little success in school, which repeatedly receives low test scores and low grades, and which has encountered, or is in danger of encountering, grade failure. They are considered to be at-risk students.

In the last decade schools have increasingly recognized the problem of students who are in danger of not having a successful voyage through school and into adult life. In the past five years there has been a great outpouring of articles and other published materials concerning these at-risk students. These students have been identified as those "...who are more susceptible to academic failure and social/psychological distress than their peers." They are perceived as more likely "...to do harm to themselves or others through underachievement, school failure, dropping out of school, violent behavior, depression, suicide or drug abuse." (1:1)

Susan Tifft described these youth aged 10-17 as being at risk of becoming troubled, unproductive, even dangerous adults. (9:51) Sharon Vereyken identified a number of factors which correlate with problems associated with students at risk. These include poverty, minority membership, single parent and step-parent homes, frequent moves, handicaps, parental alcoholism, child abuse, and the educational level of the parents. She notes that these underlying causes are conditions which the school cannot change very much but then identifies several conditions which educators can control or greatly influence. These are: low basic skills; grade retention; inclusion in low track classes; lack of parental involvement in schooling; low academic expectations of parents, teachers, and students themselves; poor quality of instruction; and lack of leisure reading. (10:19) Basically, these at-risk students are the ones who are not likely to make an adequate transition to desired types of adult lives. (4:5) (6:4)

The students in the middle level remediation program at Vilonia Public Schools meet one or more, usually several, of these characteristics or conditions. These students are identified by MAT6 scores, the state Minimum Performance Test scores, seventh and eighth grade teachers, and failure in grades seven and eight.

Once these students have been identified, they are assigned to a regular classroom teacher experienced in reading and remediation efforts at this level. Students with critical content/skill deficiencies then come to this classroom for their math, science, social studies, and language arts classes.

The approach employed in this middle level program has several goals. The first major goal is to provide students with an enriched curriculum which includes both remediation and the regular content and experiences for that course. A second goal is to maintain an academic focus in the classroom rather than a behavioral or training one. The third goal is to enhance student self-concept and increase students' expectations of themselves. A fourth goal is for students to attain the appropriate stage of discipline. The fifth goal is for students to pass the state Minimum Performance Test (MPT) and be able to continue on through high school in regular classes without tracking per se' (i.e., course selection will be based upon student interest and free choice).

The first goal requires much planning and preparation. Marshaling of resources is a necessity as both regular and remedial materials have to be readily available. Communication concerning the program and its goals must be established and maintained with students and their parents and

with professional colleagues and staff. Understanding and supportive administrators are essential to the success of the venture. The program is comprehensive and intensive and must be seen in perspective. (6:11)

Students are assigned regular content and skills to be learned and acquired. Readiness deficiencies for these assignments are identified and students receive additional assistance from the teacher in the form of tutorial and/or small group work. Students receive feedback regarding the quality and quantity of their work, participation, and progress. Completing tasks assigned and/or chosen is an important subgoal which is also emphasized.

Work towards accomplishing the second goal, maintaining an academic focus, begins in preschool planning, is a part of the first day's class structure, and remains throughout the year as an underlying theme. This does not mean that there is never a time for a short period of relaxation or some levity in the classroom. It is recognized that these students are at the point in their development where they are exhibiting a more mature understanding of humor, and this can be used effectively in the learning process and in creating the desirable classroom ethos. It must be remembered, however, that many of these students may be in this program, at least in part, because of ineffective or detrimental habits

acquired earlier in their school career. Many have never acquired adequate learning skills. The emphasis, therefore, continues to be on learning--catching up in content and skills, learning how to learn, and staying up through the acquisition of the regular curriculum material. The books, journals, bulletin board, and other features of the classroom are used to reflect the academic focus.

The second goal is rather comprehensive. It includes not only the amelioration of the content and skill deficiencies, the acquisition and usage of learning skills, and experiencing the regular curriculum, but also involves the students in thinking skills. Pupils are engaged through questioning, games, and assignments and encouraged to use their new and developing powers of insight, consideration, and reasoning to produce understanding and perspective and in solving academic problems.

The students are perceived as developing rational beings and not automatons to be trained as an animal might be. This means more explanation and rationale must be provided by the teacher. It means, in Fred Newman's terms, that students move beyond motivation, a general desire to succeed, to engagement which also includes participation, connection, attachment, and integration in particular tasks and settings. (5:34) This also increases curriculum holding power. (3:2)

Goal three, enhancing student self-concept and self-expectation, is related to and overlaps the other four goals. The Vilonia approach emphasizes the development and enhancement of a positive self-concept through success-oriented teaching, accomplishment, and recognition. The basic assumption is that it is reasonable and prudent to expect students to take the next step beyond where they are and to continue taking similar steps. This rationale backs the basic teaching plan implemented.

Instruction is adapted to these students through the attempt to select appropriate objectives at the proper levels of difficulty, to determine the most efficient and effective route to achieving the objective, to select and use the most appropriate materials, and to employ good human relation skills with these emerging adolescents. Students are shown how what they are learning and doing is related to their needs and interests including moving on through high school in a regular pattern and success in life.

As students experience success, receive recognition, and become active participants, their sense of accomplishment seems to increase. Their willingness to extend and attempt more then becomes evident, and they now appear to expect more of themselves.

The fourth goal, students to attain the appropriate stage of

discipline, requires a good plan, purposeful activity, patience, and perseverence. Tanner and Tanner assert that discipline is a stage not an age. (7:250) An assumption in the Vilonia program is that students will achieve most of what they desire--success in school, recognition, a sense of belonging, and general good feelings about themselves--if they exhibit age-appropriate behavior. They will also achieve more of what the school desires if they do this. Based upon this rationale, the plan of action incorporates some of the concepts of the stages of discipline described by Laurel Tanner which address both the role of the student and the teacher in a parallel format. (8:28)

If students arrive at the middle school level with inappropriate listening skills, unable to follow directions and participate, and unwilling to share, they have not attained the first or basic disciplinary stage. They are deficient in both learning skills and self-control. The remediation approach employed attempts to use a combination of instructional and classroom management skills which are considered to be effective.

The instructional skills utilized include establishing set, teaching to the objective, checking for understanding, providing guided and independent practice, and increasing meaning and sense of accomplishment through closure. Classroom management skills used

include organizing and managing classroom space and materials to prevent problems and developing rules, procedures, and consequences which are taught, implemented, and maintained. The emphasis here is on planning, prevention, monitoring, and consistency.

An explanation usually is given for the basis and rationale for the rules, procedures, and consequences. It is believed that this increases the meaning and value of these for middle level students and concomitantly increases their understanding of the decision-making process. The goal is for students not only to acquire and exhibit appropriate behavior when the teacher or another authority figure is present but to reach the point where they will behave properly without external influence. What is sought is greater self-regulation and for students to eventually become socially responsible, independent individuals in control of their lives.

Vilonia Schools are aware that middle level students are still in the formative process of becoming autonomous persons, and this awareness necessitates that the institution never lose sight of what it wants students to eventually become even as it struggles to take care of present concerns and problems. This vision of both what is and what can be is an important driving force for the plan.

The fifth goal is to enable the students to pass the state Minimum

Performance Test and to continue their education in high school without tracking per se'. The aim is not only to pass the MPT but to be able to exercise free choice in selecting courses in high school and not be automatically tracked because of labeling and/or basic content/skill deficiencies. To achieve this, a focus of attention is maintained on the basic content and skills over which the students will be tested on the MPT, and emphasis and reliance is placed upon the first four goals. It is believed that the achievement of these four goals will help to ensure the success of the fifth one.

The first half of the fifth goal was achieved for the 1988-1989 and 1989-1990 eighth grade students. All of them in the program passed the MPT in the spring. It is still too early to determine the success of the second part of the goal, but those who were in the program in the eighth grade are now in regular classes in high school.

In conclusion, this is the remediation approach used at Vilonia Public Schools to remediate content/skill deficiencies in its middle level students. It is not considered to be a panacea, and it is not presented as if it represents perfection. It is believed, however, that the school now more clearly understands the problem, that it knows more about what to do, and that the approach is working. Continued observation and

evaluation will reveal how well it is working. The school feels enough satisfaction about the approach to share it and to assert that remediation of content/skill deficiencies in middle level students can occur with a plan of action based on research and lots of hard work.

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